CHRISTMAS EVE SERMON
A Service of Lessons and Carols
December 24, 2006

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Welcome to all on this Christmas Eve. A special welcome to all who are our guests this evening. We are glad you are here to celebrate this holy night together, and we extend to you our warmest wishes for a joyful Christmas.

Ministers across the land are not sure what to expect this evening. It is Sunday, after all. Stalwart, regular church attendees were in their pews this morning, and we're not at all certain that they will come back, eight or so hours later, for a second dose. It's not unlike the Sunday doubleheaders of my childhood: two games for the price of one—seven straight hours of baseball, which for some sounds like heaven, but for others, a little excessive. In any event, I'm glad you are here for the second or first time today.

Sometimes one is given a sermon illustration, a story, an incident, that is simply too good not to be used. Sometimes we receive, out of the blue, what James Forbes, Pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, calls a "fax from heaven."

And so it came to pass that the preachers in the community opened the *Chicago Tribune* last Wednesday, turned to the Metro section, and received a "fax from heaven" in the form of a headline: "32 Jesuses Found in a Yard . . . Statues taken from outdoor crèches are being claimed at St. Symphorosa." Someone took thirty-two baby Jesuses from their mangers in crèches in front yards of a South Side neighborhood and deposited all thirty-two in the yard of a woman, who was so upset by the whole thing that she wants to remain anonymous. She took all thirty-two to her church, where neighbors were reclaiming them. The church's religious education director sympathized: "No one usually wakes up to thirty-two Jesuses in the backyard."

Rather than keep them as material evidence, police allowed the church to return them to their owners. Police spokesperson Patrick Camden got off the best line of all: "Baby Jesus belongs in a nativity scene, not in the evidence and recovered property room at the police station."

A "fax from heaven" like that is simply too good not to find its way into a sermon on Christmas Eve.

One of the oldest Christmas traditions of all is the human need to portray the nativity artistically. A visit to any art museum testifies to the reality that human creativity has been inspired and captivated by the event that happened in Bethlehem of Judea 2,000 years ago. Artists of the Italian Renaissance painted the scene, over and over, gorgeously. Mary always in blue, Joseph serenely keeping watch, the sky alive with shimmering angels, and in the center, a newborn infant.

It has inspired the highest art the human race has ever produced. And it has inspired dramatizations, reenactments—grand and elaborate, and common and simple—ever since. What would Christmas be without the children's Christmas pageant?

The classic, of course, is Barbara Robinson's *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever.* It's narrated by a little girl whose mother is the pageant director. It still makes me laugh out loud, particularly when the pageant director, before the first rehearsal, tells the story of the birth of Jesus to the cast, which includes "the horrible Herdmans," the worst children ever. The Herdmans have never heard the story before and are mesmerized.

The director begins, "Joseph and Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child . . ."

"Pregnant!" yelled Ralph Herdman.

> Well, that stirred things up. All the big kids began to giggle and all the little kids wanted to know what was so funny and mother had to hammer on the floor with a blackboard pointer. "That's enough, Ralph" she said and went on with the story.
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> "I don't think it's very nice to say Mary was pregnant," Alice whispered to me.
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> "But she was," I pointed out. In a way, I agreed with her. It sounded too ordinary. Anybody could be pregnant, "Great with child" sounded better for Mary.
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> "I'm not supposed to talk about people being pregnant." Alice folded her hands in her lap. . . . "I'd better tell my mother."
>
> "Tell her what?"
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> "That your mother is talking about things like that in church."
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> It's the whole point of the story, of course. Anybody could get pregnant.

And so we portray the familiar scene in beautiful coffee table nativities, carved of wood, made of crystal, ceramic; nativities of every culture and race; in front of our homes, on the church lawn. Sometimes we create a live nativity, featuring real people as Mary and Joseph, shepherds and wise men, a real baby, and live animals. A friend of mine, Jerry Shetler, when he became pastor of a big Presbyterian church in Dallas, thought the church's live nativity ought to include a Texas longhorn steer. It was a great hit until the longhorn became bored with his role and decided to run—which he did, pretty much taking the stable and manger with him, running down Preston Road through traffic with Jerry Shetler, playing Joseph that evening, in hot pursuit.

What would Christmas be without the pageants? Ours was wonderful, just a few hours ago right here, with Mary and Joseph, children and cherub choirs singing, a glorious camel lumbering down the center aisle, and the bright star of Bethlehem rising right here, in this pulpit.

Down in Florida, six-year-old Eleanor, my granddaughter, was a little late for tryouts and so did not get a speaking part in her church's pageant. She told her father that she was disappointed and was praying that something might happen to one of the angels so she could get the part. My son reported that Eleanor's prayers were answered and she landed a real prize, the part of the innkeeper—the first innkeeper (there are a lot of children in that church so the inn has a management team).

Why? Why is it that we paint, portray, and reenact this simple scene over and over? What is it about the nativity? Crowds are flooding to see a new motion picture this year that does a good job of portraying the story. The director of the film, Catharine Hardwick, recalled how as a child she constructed reproductions of the manger scene in her Texas living room. The movie, she said, is "based on a spiritual desire to get closer to God by identifying with ordinary people who experienced him."

Commenting on the movie's popularity, Sister Rose Pacetta, director of a religion and media center in California, said, "There is a great yearning for the holy—and we need a way to access that."

It is so very simple, so very human.

Octavian, Augustus Caesar, is the Roman Emperor.

A man by the name of Quirinius is Governor of Syria.

In a remote outpost of the Empire, in Judea, the town of Nazareth, a man and woman begin a long journey. She is heavily pregnant. They head south toward Bethlehem, his hometown, to be counted in a census. It is a hard

journey. He walks. She rides their donkey mostly. They stop at the end of the day at an inn or roadhouse, where they find food and shelter. Finally they arrive in Bethlehem, a small village. The only inn is already full. The innkeeper, perhaps seeing that this woman might deliver her child at any moment, offers the shelter of the stable out back. They make themselves as comfortable as they can, warmed by the heat of the sheep, goats, and cattle. That night, her labor begins. The baby comes. The man helps her. Together they wrap the infant boy in the bands of clean cloth thy have brought along for this purpose. Swaddling will hold him straight and keep him warm. She nurses him.

They both hold him, look at him in that wonder that a baby inspires in new parents. And when he sleeps and they finally, exhausted, become drowsy, they place him in a cow's feed box, a manger.

It is so simple. And what we believe about this story is that it is true. It contains truth, ultimate truth about ourselves and about God.

"Anybody could be pregnant," the little girl in the story said. Anybody could be—and everybody is at one point or another—in an unexpected situation, not sure what to do next. Anybody could be and everybody is, at one time or another, uncertain and afraid of what the future will bring—for the world, for our nation, for ourselves. Anyone could be and everyone of us is, in some way, on a journey, a sometimes long and arduous journey into an unknown future.

It is a true story about real people. About you and me.

And it is a story about God, a story of God coming into the world—not in the way anybody expected, not with fanfare and grandeur and majesty, but quietly, simply.

It is a story that makes the most amazing suggestion: that God loves the world so much, loves the people of the world, each and every one of them—loves you and me, that is to say—enough to become vulnerable, to become like us, to love us by being with us, born like us, living in this world like us, laughing and loving and hoping and dreaming like us, and, finally, incredibly, dying like us.

Writer Frederick Buechner remembers the sermon he heard that shined the light of the story's truth into his own life. It was fifty years ago, in Manhattan. He was trying to write a novel and went to church on Sunday morning. The minister was a man named George Buttrick. It was mid-December. The minister said that someone asked him after church the week before if he were going home for Christmas. He looked up at the congregation and asked it again, "Are you going home for Christmas?"

Buechner remembers. “He asked in a way that brought tears to my eyes and made it almost unnecessary for him to move on to his answer to the question, which was that home, finally, is the Manger in Bethlehem, the place where at midnight even the oxen kneel.”

And so, in some way, this story is home, a place where we belong. In Jesus Christ, God’s own Son, we are safe, secure.

In this story there is light shining in whatever darkness surrounds us this evening.

In this story about a humble birth, a newborn infant who becomes a man, we know we are loved by God, and so we are safe, secure, alive, challenged to live as fully as we can, and home, home at last.

So yes, once again, let us—

> Come to Bethlehem and see
> Him whose birth the angels sing:
> Come, adore, on bended knee
> Christ, the Lord, the newborn King.
> Amen.